



REAL LIFE STORY

OREM'S HOLLYWOOD INSIDER SHARES TALES OF WALT DISNEY AND CLARK GABLE

BY NATALIE HOLLINGSHEAD

With a smooth leather vest, oversized belt buckle and well-worn cowboy boots, Grenade Curran looks like he just stepped off the set of an old Western movie.

His throaty laugh and eager smile, though genuine, feel suspiciously scripted, and his deep voice booms across the living room like an actor on a movie set.

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The decor in Grenade Curran's Orem home has a Hollywood theme from floor to ceiling, including photos of friends Clark Gable, Walt Disney and Ava Gardner.

Perhaps the saying is true — old habits die hard. Grenade can't help but look the part. The 70-year-old man started out in diapers at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in Hollywood and later worked for several

studios, including Walt Disney Studios and Columbia Pictures.

He's seen both sides of the camera after working as a production assistant or actor in more than 20 feature films and 70 commercials.

Now retired and living in Orem, Grenade still has that silver screen sparkle. He gets a gleam in his eye when he talks about the good old days spent wrestling with Clark Gable, dancing with Ava Gardner and joking with Walt Disney.

Diapers, Camera, Action

Getting your first break in the movie business can be rough, but Grenade had an easy in.

"I started acting before I was born," Grenade says. "My mother already planned it."

Grenade's mother, Marion Ahern, was a dancer for MGM. Originally from Provo, she left Utah to pursue her Hollywood dreams in the '30s. She started out at Paramount but was transferred to MGM, where she met Grenade's father, Charles, who was also on studio loan-out from Twentieth Century Fox.

With a father who was a stand-in double for Clark Gable and a mother who danced in



musicals, Grenade spent a lot of his childhood on movie sets.

"When I was a tiny baby I started out right in front of the camera," Grenade says.

Actors like Robert Taylor, of "Billy the Kid" fame, would often tote him around. One of Grenade's most embarrassing moments came as an infant when he soaked Robert's shirt with a wet diaper.

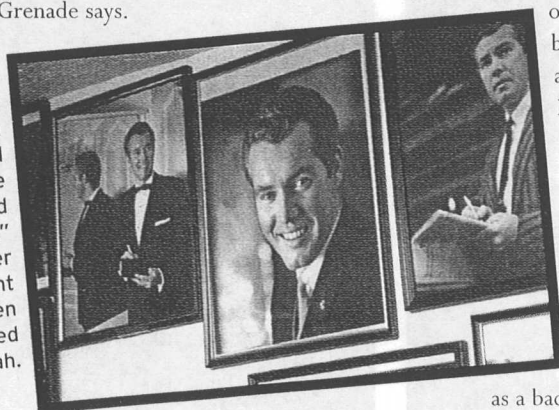
"Mother was mortified," he says.

When still a young boy, Grenade took a trip with his dad to Clark Gable's house. When Clark approached Grenade to give him a customary hair tousle, Grenade tried to gain the upper hand by messing up the star's hair first. Before Grenade could escape, Clark had him pinned on the living room floor and the two wrestled while Grenade's dad laughed.

"No one in motion picture history ever messed up Clark Gable's hair but me,"

Grenade says.

Grenade Curran looked and acted the part of "old Hollywood." He later raised eight children and moved to Utah.



Dancing with the Stars

With both parents entrenched in show business, Grenade started with one foot in the

studio door. His mother took advantage of her position and taught Grenade everything she knew — including how to dance.

MEMORABILIA

Walking through the basement of Grenade Curran's Orem home is like taking a private stroll down Hollywood Boulevard.

Autographed pictures and snapshots of movie greats line the walls, and Grenade has a story for each one.

His large memorabilia collection includes:

- a cowboy hat worn by Roy Rogers
- a vest worn by Kirk Douglas
- a pair of cowboy boots worn by John Wayne
- a scarf from Clark Gable

"She planned certain things," he says. "The opportunity would not have been there had my parents not been in the industry."

Marion's dance lessons paid off when Grenade got his first big break. At 19, Grenade attended a cattle call at the Nico Charisse Dance Studio and impressed the director with his dancing skills.

"He asked, 'Where'd you learn to dance like that?'" Grenade recalls. "I said, 'My mom.'"

Through his dancing skills, Grenade won spots

as a backup dancer on "Singing in the Rain," "Band Wagon" and "Silk Stockings."

The 6-foot-1 Grenade was also used as the dance rehearsal partner for Ava Gardner in "The Barefoot Contessa."

Every Once In A While, Something Comes Around That Changes Everything

Trellis on the Green



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Although dancing was his bread-and-butter for a time, Grenade was also cast in minor acting roles in the productions.

"Through being there, I did a lot of small bit parts," he says.

Uncle Dalt Wisney

With a few years of entertainment experience under his belt, Grenade got a job working for Walt Disney Studios where he was introduced to the company's namesake. Walt was intrigued with Grenade's unusual name

(it's French) and quickly gave him a nickname.

"He called me 'Shrapnel' and I called him 'Uncle Dalt Wisney,'" Grenade says. "He got a charge out of me giving him back the same treatment he gave me."

Whenever Grenade ran into Walt they'd exchange nicknames and Walt would ask for his opinions on Disneyland, which was under construction. One of Grenade's suggestions that Walt used was to have blue and green colored tiles decorate the base of Tomorrow Land's 24-hour clock.

"It's nice to have the big gun on your side," Grenade says, "but you earn that trust."

At the same time Grenade was working in production on live-action films "Davy Crockett" and "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," his cousin John Ahern worked in film animation. John's father moved to Hollywood with his sister (Grenade's mother) and also worked in the movie business.

John and Grenade worked together on Disney projects such as "Lady and the Tramp." John created an animation sequence, and Grenade did sound effects as a chicken and a dog. (For more on John's career, see page 50).

His Own Script

Living in Hollywood exposed Grenade to a rougher side of life, but he says he didn't stray from his morals.

"It's the roughest industry in the world," he says. "Fame and money can break the strongest."

Often, actors would pass around cigarettes or drinks on breaks, and Grenade would decline. After several attempts to get him to smoke failed, Grenade says the actors stopped pressuring him.

"Lee Marvin, who drank and smoked, would

THAT'S A WRAP

Grenade Curran participated either in front of or behind the camera in dozens of films and TV series.

FEATURE FILMS

Singing in the Rain (1952)
The Band Wagon (1953)
Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954)
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954)
Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier (1954)
Guys and Dolls (1955)
Silk Stockings (1957)
Sergeants 3 (1962)
The Professionals (1966)
Camelot (1967)
Planet of the Apes (1968)
The Great Bank Robbery (1969)
Hello Dolly (1969)
The Good Guys and The Bad Guys (1969)
There was a Crooked Man (1970)
Cold Turkey (1971)

TELEVISION SERIES

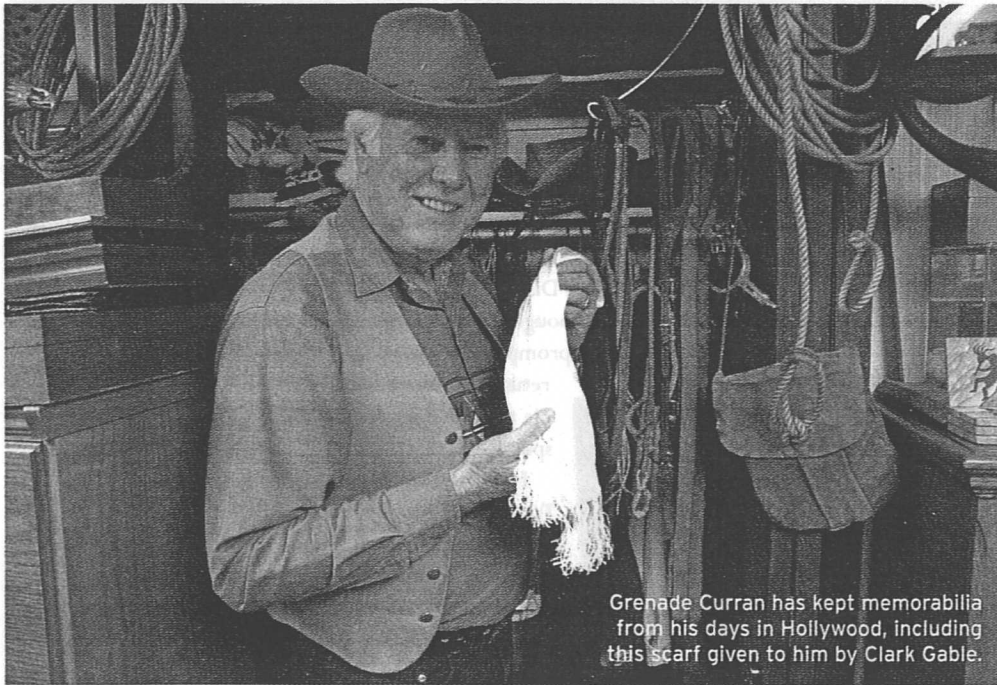
Cheyenne (1955)
The Beverly Hillbillies (1962)
Star Trek (1966)
The High Chaparell (1967)
Garrison's Gorillas (1967-1968)
The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Show (1968)
Queen for a Day (1969)

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Grenade Curran has kept memorabilia from his days in Hollywood, including this scarf given to him by Clark Gable.

not allow someone else to offer me a cigarette," Grenade says. "He didn't want me to lose the standard of goodness that I stood for. I stood of my own conviction, my own choice."

He turned down \$500,000 (equivalent to more than \$3 million in today's dollars) in the late '50s to be the Marlboro Man, one of many jobs he says he was offered but refused because he didn't want to compromise his standards.

"I never did walk around trying to be better than somebody else," he says. "I walked around quietly doing my business and some people noticed."

Grenade took time off from Hollywood to serve two LDS missions — one from 1955 to 1957 in San Fernando Valley and a second from 1958 to 1960 in the Central States mission.

Final Cut

Instead of returning to Hollywood after his missions, Grenade moved to Salt Lake City and started working in a men's clothing shop. He planned to attend BYU that fall, but soon he had a part as a Native American in "Sergeants 3" with Frank Sinatra.

Although Grenade was nearly trampled to death while filming the movie in Kanab, he took a liking to Westerns and worked primarily with the genre for the rest of his career.

After "Sergeants 3" wrapped, Grenade returned to Provo and enrolled at BYU. In

1965, he graduated with a double major in motion picture/television and public relations/advertising.

Soon after graduation, Grenade was back in Hollywood, where he worked behind the camera on films like "Major Dundee," "The Professionals" and "Planet of the Apes." He also produced a small independent film, "Ransom Money," in 1969.

"I did acting, behind-the-scenes, wardrobes, props, stunts — everything," Grenade says.

From his work on Westerns, Grenade befriended actors Roy Rogers, Lee Marvin and Clint Walker.

In the early '80s, he took leave of Hollywood again and returned to Utah. Here he met his wife, Marta, raised eight children and formed an independent film company.

Grenade continued acting for advertisements and television commercials with clients like Marriott Hotels and Snowbird Resort.

Now semi-retired, Grenade's Hollywood days are the inspiration for a book he is writing on his life experiences, called "My Life in the Movie Business."

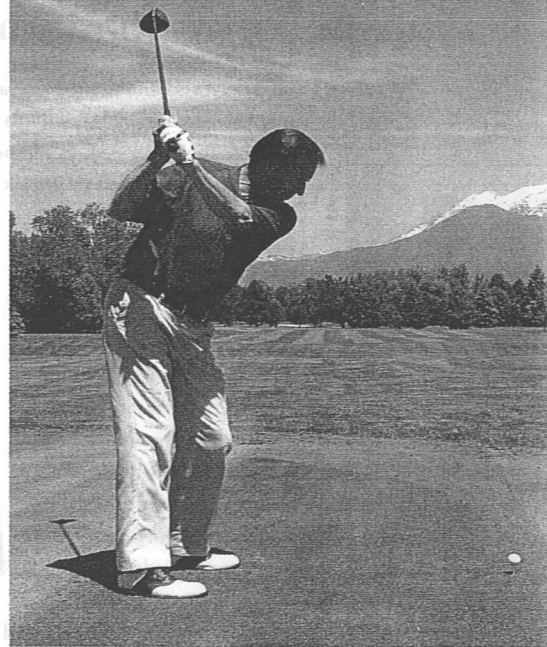
He is also looking for funding for a movie he wants to produce on the Utah War, tentatively titled "Shed No Blood," and he recently returned from a weekend with Clint Walker at the Western Legends Roundup in Kanab.

"I still keep my hands in it," he says.

Although he claims he's retiring, it may be an act.

Old habits die hard. ♦

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Animated Life

Spanish Fork's John Ahern has 5 Emmys and 1 Golden Award

J

ohn Ahern remembers the day a teacher confiscated one of his comic book creations.

Like many of his fifth-grade peers in Southern California, John loved to draw cartoons and would often bring his sketches to school.

One day, a teacher seized one of his comics and snarled, "You'll never be an artist."

That was nearly 60 years ago and John has yet to forget the stinging comment. But after "Muppet Babies" won five Emmys with John as producer, he's certainly proved the teacher wrong.

John, who retired to Spanish Fork in 2000, worked for 50 years as a motion picture screen cartoonist. During his career, he garnered awards from the Carnegie Art Institute and Academy of Arts and Sciences. John's most recent accolade came in April when he received a Golden Award from the Animation Guild for his outstanding career.

Like his cousin Grenade Curran (see page 44), John grew up around

the entertainment business. Their parents worked together at MGM studios, and Grenade and John attended the same high school.

Both worked at Walt Disney Productions in 1955, where John got his start in animation. Although John's college degree was in engineering, his love of art prompted him to apply at Disney after he

returned home from an Army stint overseas. He took an animation test and was hired on the spot.

His first assignment was for "Lady and the Tramp," and assignments on other animated classics like "Sleeping Beauty" and "The Aristocats" followed. In seven months, he was made an animation assistant in the special effects department, a promotion that had taken others seven years.

John's creative mind was also put to work on Disneyland, as company executives often asked the staff artists for ideas on the unfinished amuse-

ment park.

"I came up with the idea for the Matterhorn and thought we could have a ski jump with it and invite clubs to ski jumping meets," John



John Ahern was the animator of Templeton for "Charlotte's Web."

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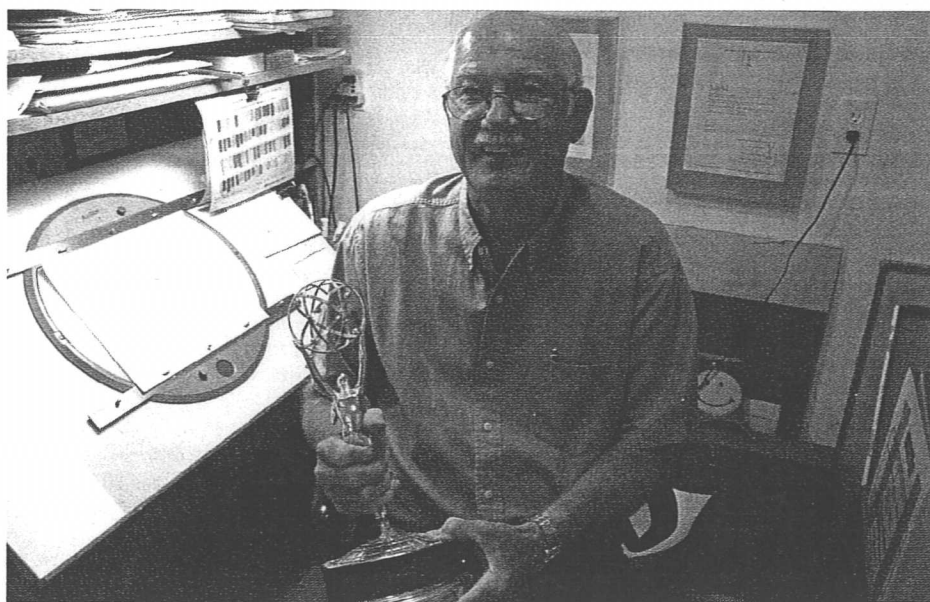
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John Ahren won an Emmy as producer of "Muppet Babies." Now he illustrates books and teaches animation at BYU.



says. "The lawyers nearly died so instead they fixed mountain climbers on the outside."

Toon Town

In the '60s, John left Disney and started working at Hanna-Barbera Productions. While there, John worked on one of animation's most recognizable characters: Templeton in "Charlotte's Web."

"We created Templeton where he was really more a personality," John says, "and he stole the show."

But being an animator doesn't always mean creating characters, and John says much of his career was spent recreating scenes, doing layout or working on storyboards.

"Your feature was really the prime thing and the other stuff was just grinding out," he says. "You had to be able to draw anything and

make it look identical to something another guy had drawn."

While at Hanna-Barbera, John worked as a layout artist on "The Flintstones," "The New Tom and Jerry Show" and "Scooby Doo." He also freelanced for Disney's "True Life and Adventure" series doing photography work.

During his 50-year career, John worked for a handful of Hollywood's best animation studios and helped create some of television's most memorable cartoons. At Marvel Productions, John did storyboards for favorites like "Spiderman" and "GI Joe." It was at Marvel that John won an Emmy as producer of "Muppet Babies."

His work as an artist has also taken him overseas to England, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, where he represented a dozen studios and supervised animation production.

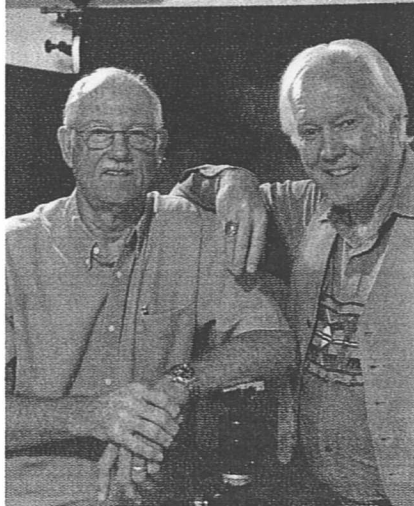
New Drawings

In 1999, John retired from the Motion Picture Screen Cartoonist Union and left California for Utah. He and his wife, Shirley, chose to live in Spanish Fork so they could be closer to the mountains and their four grown children.

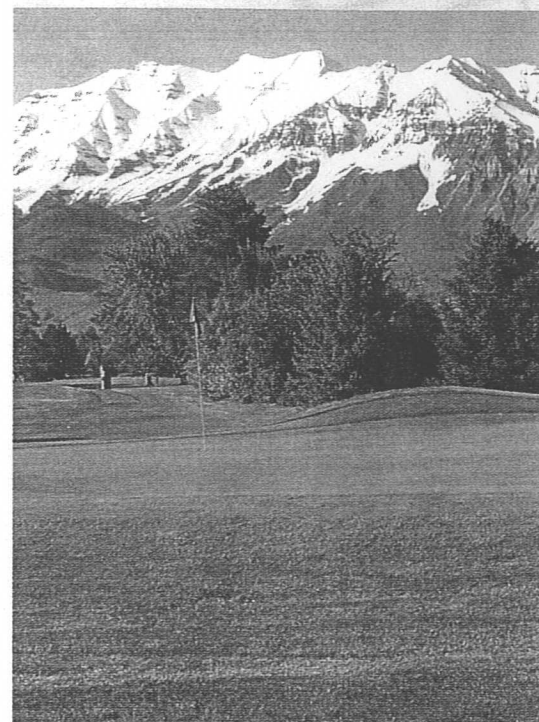
He still keeps his hands in the animation industry by illustrating books and developing part of a new program for the Discovery Channel. John also runs his own photography business and teaches animation full-time at BYU.

If only his fifth-grade teacher could see him now. ♦

Cousins John Ahren and Grenade Curran worked together in Hollywood.



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